IN THE CLAIMS:

Please amend Claims 1, 10, 14, 18, 20 and 22 as follows. The claims, as pending in the subject application, read as follows:

1. (Currently Amended) An image input apparatus comprising:

reading means for reading an encryption key stored in an external source;

storage means for storing said encryption key to execute an encryption process;

encryption means for encrypting digital information by using said encryption key stored in the storage means;

output means for outputting the encrypted digital information; and ~~after completion of the encryption by said encryption means; and~~

erasing means for erasing said encryption key stored in said storage means after encrypting the digital information by said encryption means and before ~~corresponding to the~~ outputting ~~of~~ the encrypted digital information by said output means.

2. (Original) An image input apparatus according to claim 1, wherein said encryption means encrypts the digital information which has undergone a high-efficiency coding operation.

3. (Original) An image input apparatus according to claim 1, further comprising image pick-up means for optically picking up an image of a subject and for generating an image signal from the picked-up image.

4. (Canceled)

5. (Canceled)

6. (Original) An image input apparatus according to claim 1, wherein said encryption key comprises an encryption key based on a common key cryptosystem.

7. (Original) An image input apparatus according to claim 1, wherein said encryption key comprises an encryption key based on a public key cryptosystem.

8. (Canceled)

9. (Canceled)

10. (Currently Amended) An image input method comprising the steps of:

reading an encryption key stored in an external source;

storing said encryption key in a storage means to execute an encryption process;

encrypting digital information by using said encryption key stored in the ~~said~~ storage means;

outputting the encrypted digital information; and ~~after completion of the encryption in said encrypting step; and~~

erasing said stored encryption key after encrypting the digital information by the encrypting step and before ~~stored in said storage means corresponding to the~~ outputting ~~of~~ the encrypted digital information by the outputting step.

11. (Original) An image input method according to claim 10, wherein the digital information which has undergone a high-efficiency coding operation is encrypted.

12. (Previously Presented) An image input method according to claim 10, wherein an image signal is generated from an optically picked up image of a subject which is converted into the digital information.

13. (Original) An image input method according to claim 10, wherein said encryption key comprises an encryption key based on one of a common key cryptosystem and a public key cryptosystem.

14. (Currently Amended) An encryption processing program stored in a computer-readable medium, comprising:

a step of reading an encryption key stored in an external source;

a ~~storage~~ step of storing said encryption key in a storage means to execute an encryption process;

a step of encrypting digital information by using said encryption key stored in ~~said~~ the storage means;

a step of outputting the encrypted digital information; and ~~after completion of the encryption in said encrypting step; and~~

a step of erasing ~~said~~ the stored encryption key after the step of encrypting the digital information and before the step of ~~stored in said storage means corresponding to the~~ outputting said ~~of the~~ encrypted digital information.

18. (Currently Amended) An image input apparatus comprising:

information encryption means for encrypting digital information by using an internal encryption key;

obtaining means for obtaining an external encryption key stored in an external source;

storage means for storing said external encryption key to execute a key encryption process;

key encryption means for encrypting said internal encryption key by using said external encryption key stored in said storage means;

output means for outputting the encrypted digital information and the encrypted internal encryption key; and ~~after completion of the key encryption by said key encryption means; and~~

erasing means for erasing ~~the~~ said external encryption key stored in said storage means after encrypting said internal encryption key by said key encryption means and before ~~corresponding to the~~ outputting said ~~of the~~ encrypted digital information and the encrypted internal encryption key by said output means.

19. (Original) An image input apparatus according to claim 18, wherein said internal encryption key comprises an encryption key based on a common key cryptosystem, and said external encryption key comprises an encryption key based on a public key cryptosystem.

20. (Currently Amended) An image input method for an image input apparatus comprising the steps of:

encrypting digital information by using an internal encryption key;

obtaining an external encryption key stored in an external source;

storing said external encryption key in a storage means to execute a key encryption process;

key encrypting said internal encryption key by using said external encryption key stored in said storage means;

outputting the encrypted digital information and the encrypted internal encryption key ~~after completion of the key encryption by in said key encryption step~~; and

erasing the stored external encryption key after encrypting the internal encryption key by the key encrypting step and before ~~stored in said storage means~~

~~corresponding to the~~ outputting ~~of~~ the encrypted digital information and the encrypted internal encryption key by the outputting step.

22. (Currently Amended) An encryption processing program stored in a computer-readable medium, comprising the steps of:

a step of encrypting digital information by using an internal encryption key;

a step of obtaining an external encryption key stored in an external source;

a step of storing said external encryption key in a storage means to execute a key encryption process;

a step of key encrypting said internal encryption key by using said external encryption key stored in said storage means;

a step of outputting the encrypted digital information and the encrypted internal encryption key ~~after completion of the key encryption in said key encrypting step~~; and

a step of erasing the stored external encryption key after encrypting the internal encryption key by the key encrypting step and before ~~stored in said storage means corresponding to the~~ outputting ~~of~~ the encrypted digital information and the encrypted internal encryption key by the outputting step.